

RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Mr. Chris Axworthy (Saskatoon—Clark's Crossing): Mr. Speaker, on December 11, I asked the Prime Minister about the government's commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In particular, I pointed out one undertaking that the government made in signing this declaration and that was to ensure that the essential needs of children should be given high priority in the allocation of resources in bad times as well as in good times.

The response of the Prime Minister was essentially, and I quote: "What we are working toward by trying to restructure the economy to build new wealth is to have more genuine resources so that we can distribute them to people in need beginning with children". In the meantime, of course one million children in Canada go hungry.

On December 11 last year Canada did indeed ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and it legally commits Canada to live up to the spirit and letter of that convention. The ratification of the document was a laudable move on the part of the government but the real test of the sincerity of the government's intentions is in its actions, not in its signature.

The day after ratification the government released its long awaited report from the Sub-Committee on Poverty. Despite numerous submissions calling for drastic changes to present government policy and progressive action against child poverty, the resulting report was one that largely justified the policies of the current government, full of token gestures and band-aid solutions.

In fact, the report ignored the large majority of evidence from well informed witnesses to the sub-committee. Far from being a blueprint for action the report simply provided excuses for past and continuing government inaction. That is one strike against the government in its batting record on children's rights.

Strike two was the federal budget which announced the end of family allowance and the scrapping of the government's long-promised national child care program.

The government claims that family allowance has been replaced with a new and improved child benefits program, but the truth of the matter is that the new program is not an improvement at all. Indeed, independent studies show that after the reforms Canada's poor

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families will receive the same number of dollars as they did before the reforms.

It is surely unacceptable for the government not to provide adequate programs, adequate opportunities for Canada's poorest children. The proposed system for benefits will not provide adequate support to either welfare families or Canada's working poor families. To hail it as an anti-poverty weapon, as the minister has done, is nothing short of misleading.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. When children relying on social assistance are getting anywhere from 44 per cent to 76 per cent of the poverty line, it is clear that their standard of living does not give them much chance to develop at all.

Welfare families will not see any gains from this new child benefit and the minister in response in this House said, and I quote: "There is though a real willingness to do the best we can to relieve those people," that is, those on welfare.

Between 44 per cent and 76 per cent of the poverty line, if that is the best the government can do for hungry children in Canada, it should be ashamed of itself. The government on the other hand seems to do a lot more for big business when it asks for money.

The UN convention also commits the government to take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child care services and facilities. In light of this, and in light of the government's budgetary statements, it seems pretty clear that the government's abandonment of its promise to institute a national child care strategy flies in the face of the convention which the Prime Minister so proudly ratified in December.

Canadian families in need of job opportunities could have told the minister and could have told the government that tens of thousands of parents, in particular single working parents in Canada, consider lack of affordable child care to be one of the greatest barriers to escaping poverty.

Finally, at the world summit in the fall of 1990, the Prime Minister committed Canada to preparing a national plan of action to implement the goals and actions discussed at the summit and to do so by the end of 1991. Canada is now three months late in meeting this dead-